BASKETBALL TEAMS' NAMES: WHAT'S THAT ABOUT?

TAGA SPORTS

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2011

LEINA KIM MAKES HER DAD PROUD

KELVIN **'THE BIG HIT'** FITIAL TAKES STOCK

BRUCE BERLINE'S BALANCING ACT

THE STILL INCREDIBLE CECILIA

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The irony wasn't lost on me when my publisher instructed me about a year ago to conceptualize, design, and produce a quarterly sports magazine for Commonwealth readers. The most sedentary person. Editing. A sports magazine. Huh.

Like that wasn't enough, he said the magazine will not just be about featuring outstanding athletes; it should also inspire people to live healthier lifestyles, to get them moving, sweating, and exercising. Like what I said in a social networking site, I *hate* exercising so I starve myself in order to balance the scales. This, I thought, is going to be harder than it looks.

Nearly a full revolution around the sun later and we're here, marking the first ever anniversary edition of TAGA *Sports*. Have we succeeded in meeting our modest goals? Not that we have any empirical data yet but I'd like to believe that we have made some appreciable headway in the campaign to encourage healthful habits. Anecdotal evidence will just have to do it for now.

Have I exercised more? Well, no, not if by exercise you mean going to the gym and lifting weights. But, as I've learned from all the editing I've been doing on a year's worth of sports stories, exercise doesn't necessarily have to be a structured regimen. Rather, it is a conscious decision to get your body moving. That could mean parking as far away as possible from where you are going so you are forced to walk, using a basket rather than a pushcart when shopping so you get to lug something heavy around, or using the stairs rather than the elevator to get your blood flowing, among other things. And, of course, who doesn't love to dance? It isn't Zumba but VH1's Jump Start is as good as any, never mind my two left feet and the creaky knees.

In this edition of TAGA *Sports*, I would like to particularly highlight Roselyn Monroyo's story titled "For the Love of the Game" (Page 14). It features three persons with special abilities who've challenged and conquered themselves despite the limitations and labels that some people would stick on them. Their unbridled passion for their sport pushed them to rise above their human frailties in a transformative experience that, in the process, also made them worthy of emulation and praise.

Again, for comments, violent reactions, criticisms, and suggestions for future issues, don't hesitate to shoot us an email at editor@saipantribune.com and we'd be sure to consider them in future editions of the magazine.

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jayvee_vallejera@saipantribune.com
Editor

COVER ART
Leina Kim at the Coral Ocean Point Golf Resort.

Photography by
JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

TAGA SPORTS

VOLUME 2 NO. 5
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WRITERS BLOC

MARK RABAGO

Mark's very first sports coverage was a golf tournament at the Wack Wack Golf and Country Club in his hometown of Manila. Because he knew next to nothing about the sport, he wasn't able to submit a story, to the chagrin of his editor. He is first and foremost a basketball fan, that's why he had such a ball writing the "Name Game" story in this issue of TAGA *Sports*.

HAIDEE V. EUGENIO

Haidee doesn't look like the athletic type but she sure has the stamina of an athlete when it comes to exploring trails on land or underground. Her vacations and some Saipan weekends aren't complete without walking and hiking, which she considers her remaining "sport" after falling out of love with judo, karate, and chess.

ROSELYN MONROYO

Roselyn decided early on that fast-pitch softball was not her thing after a friendly slow-pitch softball game taught her she wasn't cut out for the sport. Nor bowling, when she made a strike on her first try but rolled gutter balls with her next three rolls. She joined a women's basketball league a few months ago and treasured the moment when she faked off the defense of CNMI National U15's Rachel Abrams, pulled up for a fadeaway shot, and made the basket—her lone field goal in the entire competition. Before the year ends, she hopes to play futsal again and get that elusive first goal.

CATHERINE ROSARIO PERRY

Catherine is a returning contributor to TAGA *Sports*. She appreciates the Saipan Electronic Darts Association B league letting her sit in on a recent round of games for this issue's article "Good Dart!"...especially since the venue was packed and seating was in short demand.

WALTER CEPEDA SUTHERLAND

Walter was recently designated co-captain of the *Saipan Tribune* bowling team and is looking forward to playing for Team Tribune in the upcoming Shirley's Cup Basketball League. An avid National Football League fan, he is happy that players and owners have come to terms with the collective bargaining agreement and is looking forward to another exciting season. He religiously stays up late on Sundays to catch the games live on TV in addition to Tuesday's Monday Night Football double features.

ZOE JEWELL

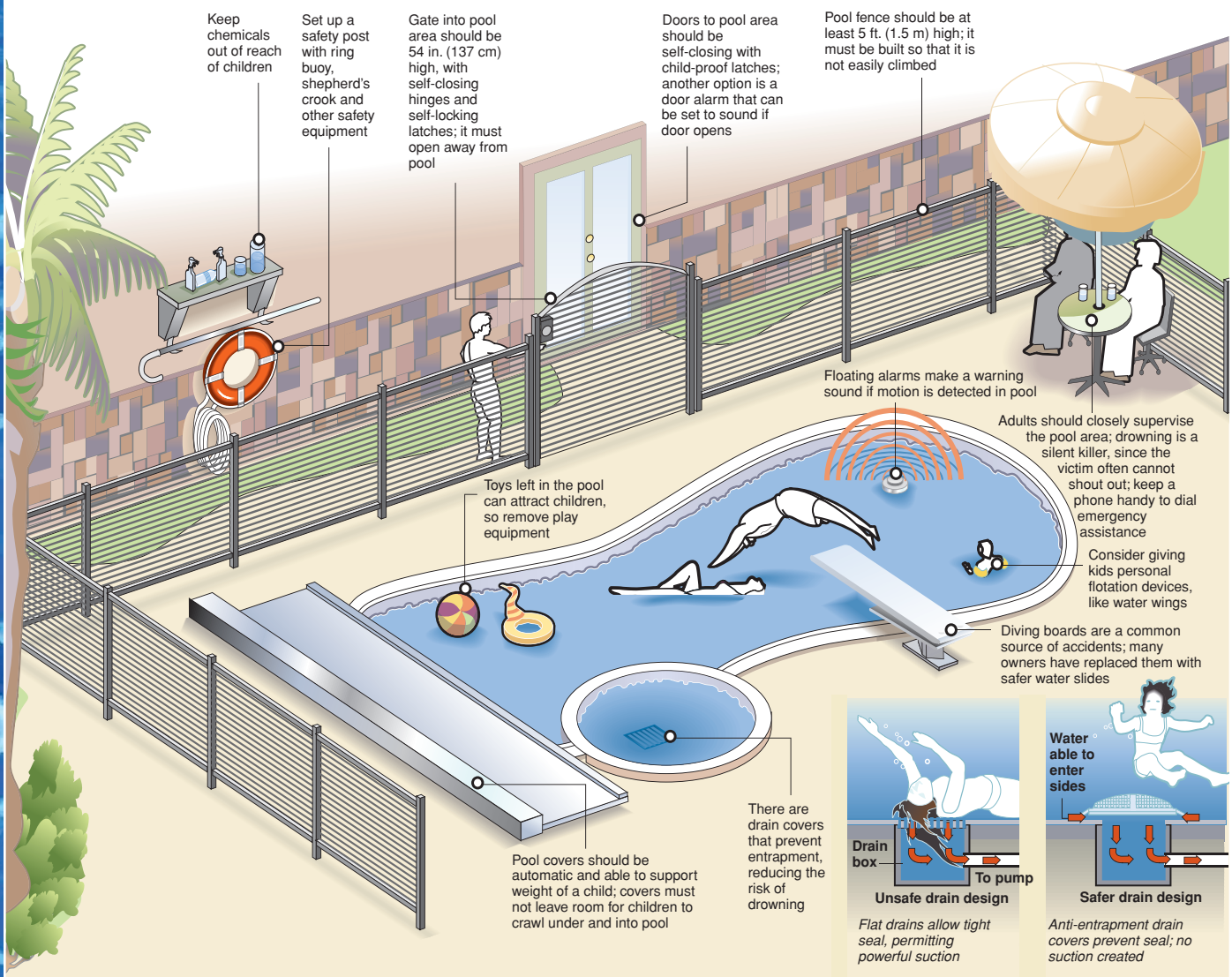
Zoe developed her love of soccer at a very young age, thanks to her dad who forced her to start playing at age 5. Though she did not want to play at first, she ended up developing a passion that would eventually lead to her to become the youngest player to ever play for the CNMI national soccer team, playing in her first game at just 13. She has been on the team for almost six years, playing in every game the CNMI has been a part of. Now, whether it's playing, watching, or writing, soccer is her life.

FERDIE PONCE DE LA TORRE

Ferdie's passion for basketball began at the age of 5 when he'd watch his three older brothers play hoops in Lilo-an, Cebu, the Philippines. He tries to finish writing all his stories for the *Saipan Tribune* before deadline whenever he has basketball games. Ferdie has been joining basketball leagues on Saipan for over a decade now. In his younger days, he tried playing three separate basketball tournaments in a single day.

Email letters to the editor to editor@saipantribune.com or mail to PMB 34, P.O. Box 10001, Saipan MP 96950. Submissions to TAGA *Sports* must include the writer's name, village address (no P.O. boxes), and daytime phone or mobile number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published or used in any medium. All submissions become the property of the publication and will not be returned.

Making your pool area safer

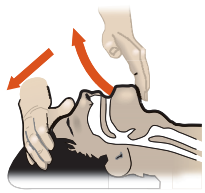

Keep chemicals out of reach of children
Set up a safety post with ring buoy, shepherd's crook and other safety equipment
Gate into pool area should be 54 in. (137 cm) high, with self-closing hinges and self-locking latches; it must open away from pool
Doors to pool area should be self-closing with child-proof latches; another option is a door alarm that can be set to sound if door opens
Pool fence should be at least 5 ft. (1.5 m) high; it must be built so that it is not easily climbed
Floating alarms make a warning sound if motion is detected in pool
Adults should closely supervise the pool area; drowning is a silent killer, since the victim often cannot shout out; keep a phone handy to dial emergency assistance
Toys left in the pool can attract children, so remove play equipment
Consider giving kids personal flotation devices, like water wings
Diving boards are a common source of accidents; many owners have replaced them with safer water slides
There are drain covers that prevent entrapment, reducing the risk of drowning
Pool covers should be automatic and able to support weight of a child; covers must not leave room for children to crawl under and into pool

Drain box
To pump
Unsafe drain design
Flat drains allow tight seal, permitting powerful suction
Water able to enter sides
Safer drain design
Anti-entrapment drain covers prevent seal; no suction created

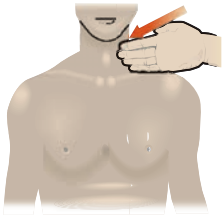
Learn to give CPR

To learn CPR, you need to take a class. Here is some of what you will learn:

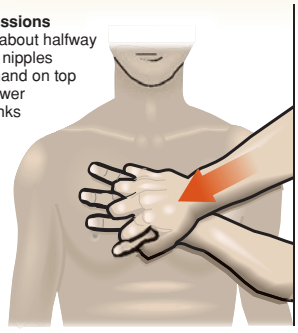
1 Call for help!
Check if victim is breathing; open airway by tilting head back, lifting chin and pushing forehead down; you may need to move lower jaw forward to keep tongue from blocking airway



2 Check if victim has pulse or if heart is beating; place your ear next to victim's face, listen for breathing; observe chest for signs of breathing, feel for air movement on your cheek

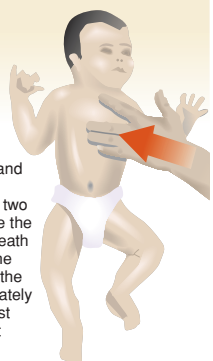


3 Chest compressions
Position your hands about halfway between the victim's nipples
- Place heel of one hand on top of other and press lower breastbone until it sinks about 2 in. (5 cm)
- Position your body directly over your hands; two breaths should be given after every 15 compressions
- Compressions should be at a rate of 80 to 100 per minute, faster than one per second



Infant CPR

- If baby is nonresponsive, put on his back and open airway by slightly tilting head and lifting chin
- If baby is not breathing, give two gentle breaths; you should see the baby's chest rise with each breath
- Use two or three fingers in the center of the chest just below the nipples; press down approximately one-third the depth of the chest
- Give 30 gentle but fast chest compressions
- Repeat with two breaths and 30 compressions; after two minutes of repeated cycles call emergency assistance and continue giving breaths and compressions



Source: American Heart Association, AP, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Orange County Fire Authority
Graphic: Scott Brown, Orange County Register

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Hike

HAIDEE V. EUGENIO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

So you think you can flex those leg muscles—up, down, push, pull, right, left, one, two, three, four—over and over again? And let's say you love nature, too. Then hiking will suit you just fine. It's the best way to experience the beauty of the great outdoors while getting lots of exercise and perhaps coming back a few shades bronzer.

Hiking combines workout, sheer adventure, and lessons in history, culture, and the environment. Here's a sampling of spots that will give you all three:

Saipan's Forbidden Island

It's not called "Forbidden" for nothing, so be sure how to get there or have a local guide. A hike through sword grass, trails, and rugged terrains to the Forbidden Island Beach takes 20 to 40 minutes or more, depending on one's pace. Climbing back up could take longer and gets tougher. As you descend the cliffs to the coastline, you are treated to spectacular views of Saipan's eastern coast. To get to the windswept Forbidden Island itself, you have to swim or wade in the water and climb rocks that are either slippery or sharp. Or you can settle for hidden tidal pools for a plunge, against a backdrop of beautiful rock formations and greenery.

Guam's Invasion Route and Tony's Falls

One of the best ways to explore Guam's most intriguing places and historic spots is by joining the Guam Boonie Stompers, which offers public hikes to different destinations every Saturday morning. If you want to test your endurance, join the combo hike to Invasion Route and Tony's Falls, which takes four hours and 1.3 miles to complete. Boonie Stompers categorizes this particular hike as "difficult," but it might be "extremely difficult" to some. The hike retraces the July 21, 1944, route of the U.S. Third Marine Division during World War II from Asan to the heights above. After taking a beating from the scorching heat, steep slopes, and sword grasses as tall as humans comes the sweet treat—cooling off at the lovely Tony's Falls.

HAIDEE V. EUGENIO

The trail to the 1,208-foot high Koko Crater in Hawaii's Oahu puts anyone's cardiovascular and muscular strengths to the test, but the sweeping views of the iconic Diamond Head Crater, Hanauma Bay, the Waikiki skyline, the ocean and mountain ranges make the strenuous hike worthwhile.

California's Bridalveil Fall

For easy hiking in California's Yosemite Valley, try a visit to the 617-foot Bridalveil Fall that flows year-round. From the parking lot, walk through a few hundred yards of paved trail accentuated by giant trees, then climb the rocks to the waterfall's base. The postcard-perfect Bridalveil Fall is famous for the mist that wafts off it, resembling a bridal veil, hence the name.

Fiji's Sigatoka Sand Dunes

If you think sand dunes are only found in deserts, you probably haven't heard of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes in the tropical island nation of Fiji in the South Pacific. This heritage site offers two hiking choices—one that you can complete in about an hour and the other, in two hours. The shorter walk brings you to the top of the sand dunes, and down to a bigger sea of sand. If you opt to hike in the morning or afternoon when the sand is not sun-baked, you could walk barefoot. The trail

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Don't take the wrong way if you are diagnosed with diabetes!

WRONG WAY

When people find out that they have diabetes, it is sometimes really scary, or sad, or even hard to believe. After all, you probably don't feel sick, or any different than you felt before you were told you have diabetes. And yet it is very important to take the disease seriously. Some people who learn they have diabetes worry that it means their life is over, or that they won't be able to do everything they used to do. Neither of those things is true. What is true is that you may need to change some things about your daily routine.

It's not your fault that you got diabetes, but it is your job to take care of yourself.*

* Source: American Diabetes Association

Diabetes is treatable and getting your eyes examined is very important. Diabetes affects vision dramatically and can lead to permanent vision loss. An eye exam is a simple thing to do and it could be the difference between catching diabetes early and getting treatment, or going blind.

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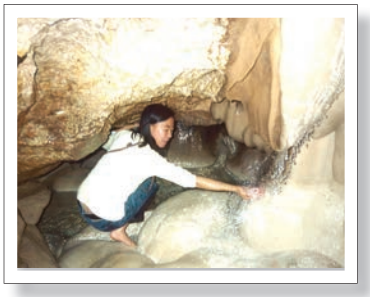
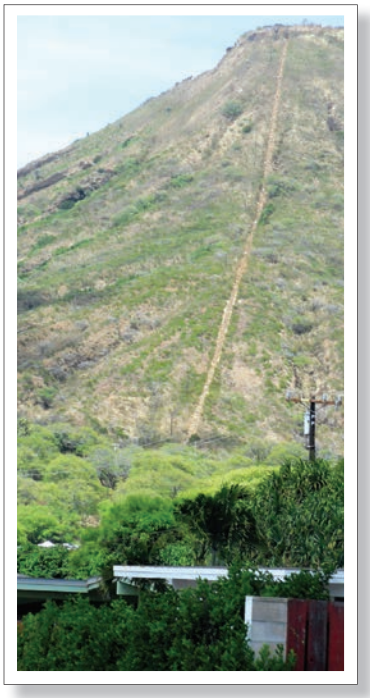
continues along the beach. Look for the arrow sign that will bring you to a majestic mahogany forest, a milestone in Fiji's drive for reforestation and environmental conservation. This expanse of 650 hectares also provides clues to the arrival of Fiji's earliest settlers some 2,600 years ago called the Lapita people, an ancient Pacific culture believed by many archaeologists to be a common ancestor in the region. Up to now, pottery shards and other cultural artifacts are still being found in these sand dunes.

Philippines' Sagada Caves

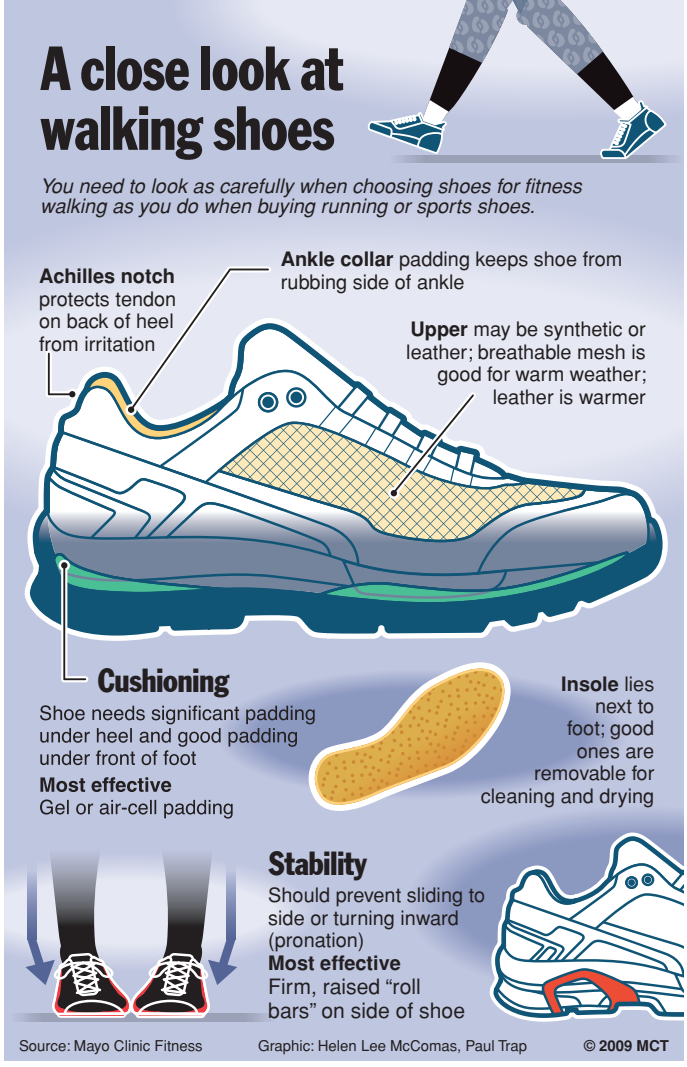


One of the coldest places in the Philippines is the picturesque town of Sagada in the Mountain Province but you can still find ways to break out in a sweat and pump up your adrenaline. The eight-hour bumpy and steep bus ride alone from the country's summer capital of Baguio to Sagada will already put your stamina to the test. Once you reach your destination, discover that untapped spelunker in you. Spelunking or caving can be a combination of hiking, swimming, wading in ice cold water, rock climbing with your bare hands or with ropes, and squeezing through narrow cave passages with chilly water running down your feet, hands, or above your head. With a local guide, the three-hour adventure to Sagada's most popular cave, called Sumaguing (or the "Big Cave" in the local dialect), begins with a walk through villages, rough roads, and a forested trail. You can take a few stops to see some hanging coffins, which Sagada is also known for.

Hawaii's Koko Crater



This steep, shade-less massive cinder cone rises 1,208 feet, enough to put your cardiovascular and muscular strengths to the test. Even from afar, the distinct, almost 90-degree incline trail lining the crater will make you think twice. The dusty trail is marked by railroad ties laid down as part of an incline tram system used to haul supplies to the military bunkers on top of the crater during World War II. There are 1,048 railroad ties or "steps" to Koko Crater's summit, so pace yourself and drink lots of water. As you gain height, you will be looking down at the iconic Diamond Head Crater (also a popular hiking spot in Honolulu), Hanauma Bay, Hawaii Kai, the Waikiki skyline, the mountain ranges, the ocean, and everything else you can set your eyes on. Watch out for the rickety bridge suspended some 10 to 15 feet above the ground, a portion of the trail many find the most difficult. For others, it's a nightmare going down to the bridge itself, so don't be surprised to see people crawling on all fours whether face up or down along this portion of the trail.


A close look at walking shoes
You need to look as carefully when choosing shoes for fitness walking as you do when buying running or sports shoes.
Achilles notch protects tendon on back of heel from irritation
Ankle collar padding keeps shoe from rubbing side of ankle
Upper may be synthetic or leather; breathable mesh is good for warm weather; leather is warmer
Cushioning
Shoe needs significant padding under heel and good padding under front of foot
Most effective
Gel or air-cell padding
Insole lies next to foot; good ones are removable for cleaning and drying
Stability
Should prevent sliding to side or turning inward (pronation)
Most effective
Firm, raised "roll bars" on side of shoe
Source: Mayo Clinic Fitness
Graphic: Helen Lee McComas, Paul Trap
© 2009 MCT

Vietnam's Cu Chi Tunnels

A tour of one of the world's most famous battlegrounds takes you first to a relaxing hike into the woods, which used to be peppered with booby traps. Then you will have to crawl your way in and out of the opened portions of the legendary, 200-kilometer system of underground tunnels that served as the location of several military campaigns during the Vietnam War. Remember those old war movies where American soldiers would run after Vietnamese rebels in the jungle, only to have the rebels disappear in plain sight? A visit to the Cu Chi tunnels in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), will give you the answer. These tunnels played a key part in the Viet Cong's resistance to American forces through which they secured American withdrawal from Vietnam. If walking and crawling are not enough of an adventure, you can also visit the shooting range where you can fire a number of assault rifles.

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FERDIE DE LA TORRE
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

When did you arrive in the CNMI and what was your first job?

I arrived here in 1995. I was an assistant attorney general and worked in the Criminal Division.

How old are you now?

I'm old enough to know that I am getting too old to continue to play against all of these younger kids.

What sports did you play in your youth?

I was involved in wrestling, basketball, and football but wrestling and basketball quickly gave way to my main sport: football. I think I started playing football when I was about 8 and continued up until I graduated high school. Back then, for my size, I was a pretty good offensive lineman and defensive end. I went to the University of Arizona and considered walking on, but I simply did not have the size or speed to play Pac-10 ball, so I retired from football while attending college and law school. During those years, I would play in random pickup basketball games but I also became involved in running.

What was the first sports league you participated in the CNMI and when was that?

I started playing Ultimate Frisbee in 1995. Back then, though, Ultimate was a bit rougher than the way we play it nowadays—it had a certain tackle football element to it.

You are probably the most active lawyer playing sports on the islands. Aside from basketball leagues, what other sports do you participate in?

I used to play a lot more sports than I do now. I used to play on the Saipan Rugby team and was involved in the Commonwealth Football League. But now, other than basketball, I am on a men's soccer team and I still play quite a bit of volleyball. I still come out and play Ultimate Frisbee once in awhile.

Of all the sports you play, which one is your favorite?

This is a difficult question because each sport has its own advantages. Although right now, I would choose basketball as my favorite. For me, I like being part of a competitive team. Once a team plays together for a while, they start to know each other's habits and nuances and they start clicking together. At that point, the game slows down, mentally, because everyone knows exactly what the other teammates are going to do and you can anticipate your teammates' moves instead of responding to them. That is when the game develops a certain ease and flow and that's a great feeling. That kind of teamwork happens most when I am playing basketball.

Sometimes people see you playing basketball for one team in the first game, then suiting up for another team in the next game. What was the most number of leagues you ever played in one day?

Yeah, I get a little carried away sometimes. I think I joined two teams at once in a basketball tournament (different age groups) and played three games in one day at Ada Gym—I did not feel so well after that. Yosh Gabaldon and I have both played two basketball games and a soccer game in one day—I didn't feel very well after that either.

Can you tell us how you managed to play all those games?

I was younger then! But it really comes down to enjoying the experience and camaraderie so much that I just can't say "no" to an invitation to play.

How do you manage your time being a private lawyer during weekdays and an athlete in your spare time?

You know, it really does not take all that much time to be active in sports. I usually play basketball two to three times a week for about an hour or two in the evening. Over the weekend, I usually get in a couple of games of volleyball down at the beach. When soccer begins, I will add in one game a week. Exercise makes me feel better during the day, lessens my stress level, and makes me more productive at the office.

Basketball fans have observed that as you get older, you seem to have become a better basketball player.

Yeah, Chris Nelson tells me that all the time: "Berline, you are the only person I know who improves at sports the older he gets!" I guess it's true, my game has improved, but when I first started playing, I was fairly terrible so there wasn't anywhere else to go but up.

What is your secret to all that stamina?

Saipan makes it easy to stay in shape with its beautiful weather and clean air. Plus, there are so many friendly, supportive, and enthusiastic people here who enjoy sports and are always encouraging people to join them. I am also lucky to have wonderful friends who are equally fanatic about sports, exercise, and the outdoors. They get me outside even when I don't really feel like it. So I live an active life and stay in fairly good shape.

How do you prepare before a game? Do you have before-game rituals?

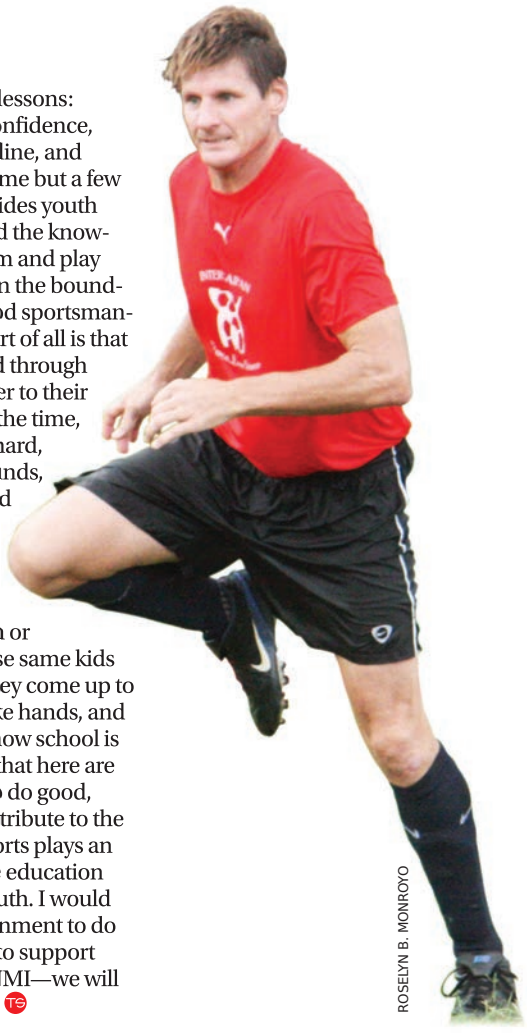
You mean, other than pray my knee holds up and hope that I don't embarrass myself, no.

What is your advice to people, particularly the youth, who want to excel in sports?

I think the simplest advice is to believe in yourself, refuse to give up, ever, and work hard.

Do you see sports as important to the CNMI?

I would wholeheartedly encourage everyone, especially kids, to get out and participate in sports. We hear it over and over again (because it is true), sports teaches youth important life lessons: perseverance, self-confidence, responsibility, discipline, and sportsmanship to name but a few of many. Sports provides youth with the maturity and the know-how to work as a team and play hard, but do so within the boundaries of rules and good sportsmanship. And the best part of all is that these lessons learned through sports directly transfer to their daily lives. I see it all the time, young kids banging hard, fighting for the rebounds, refusing to be blocked out but, when the game ends, they are respectful, congratulatory, and smiling (whether having won or lost). When I see these same kids around the island, they come up to me and say "hi," shake hands, and talk about sports or how school is going. And I can tell that here are kids who are going to do good, who are going to contribute to the CNMI. So, I think sports plays an important part in the education and raising of our youth. I would encourage our government to do as much as possible to support sports here in the CNMI—we will all be better off for it.



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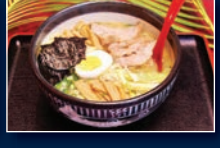

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NAME GAME

basketball edition

MARK RABAGO
TAGA Sports Associate Editor

One of my favorite teams in the NBA is called the Lakers even though the closest body of water in the City of Angels is actually not a lake but the Pacific Ocean.

The NBA's franchise in Utah is called the Jazz, after Pistol Pete Maravich's original team from New Orleans moved to Salt Lake City. The Memphis Grizzlies are named after a bear but it makes sense since the original franchise used to be in Vancouver, Canada.

In Major League Baseball, I've always been a Red Sox fan but is it really a requirement for their players to wear crimson stockings? Does the same hold true when it comes to the Chicago White Sox? Are the San Diego Padres called such because it's close to the Mexican border and the city has a predominantly Hispanic population?

In the National Football League, Washington and Kansas City continue to use Redskins and Chiefs as their monikers despite strong protest from Native Americans.

I do get it that the Miami Dolphins, Pittsburgh Steelers, and Dallas Cowboys are named so because of the marine mammal, the type of industry, and the culture closely associated with these sports cities.

What's in a name? In the CNMI, team names range from the ubiquitous (Watever in billiards and darts), the absurd (Buraot in basketball), and the commercial (Brewers and Rangers in baseball), to the classic (Islanders in indoor volleyball and Ol'Aces in both basketball, baseball, softball, and soccer), and the downright vulgar (Cleveland Steamers in beach volleyball).

Through more than 10 years of covering, writing, and editing sports stories in the Commonwealth, I've always been interested in team names and their origins.

The following are names of Rotary and inter-village basketball teams and their probable provenance based on my conversations with players, coaches, and team officials.

I picked the sport Mr. Naismith invented with peach baskets and an improvised soccer ball first so as not to overwhelm readers with the sheer volume of material (OK, I admit I'm biased because I've always been and will always be a diehard basketball fan).

TANAPAG WARRIORS

The Saipan Major League has the Tanapag Falcons, but in the early to the mid part of the last decade, the Tanapag Warriors were the pride of northern Saipan.

The village adopted the name "Warriors" for their basketball teams because they believe players from Tanapag are tough and relentless on the court. These traits and always being there to help a teammate have often been the calling card of squads from Tanapag, hence the seemingly gang-like culture of their squads.

Notable players from Tanapag include Joe Lifoifoi, Mario Aguon, Dimas Omar, and the slam-dunking and charismatic JBoy Deleon Guerrero.

HI-5

Led by the Rasa brothers—Ponce and Steve—and everyone's favorite banger, Tim Wesley, Hi-5 had its heyday in the late '90s.

According to Hi-5 founder and coach Eric Atalig, the team got its name because Susupe, where the team is based, is district 5.

Also, he said his players always had a habit of high-fiving each other following a successful play.

Before Hi-5, teams from the village were called Susupe Lakers, in obvious reference to the manmade lake and landmark that dominates Susupe's topography.

Other notable players that suited up for the team include Pete and Francis Mendiola and Frank Aldan.

OL'ACES

The team from Oleai is the closest thing to sports royalty in the Commonwealth. From basketball to baseball, volleyball, and soccer—the name Ol'Aces has a team taking part in it at one time or another in its storied history. But why Ol'Aces? Is it because there are a lot of poker machines in the village?

Actually, the top card in the deck has more to do with the Ol'Aces' name than the accursed electronic card game, as players from Oleai always believe they are the cream of the crop—an ace—in whatever sport they join in.

Notable alumni of Ol'Aces include no less than the current governor, Benigno R. Fitial; NMASA Hall of Famer Tony Rogolifoi; many time coach of the year Elias Rangamar; scoring demon Freddie Pelisamen, national team staples Jeremy Winkfield and Dan Barcinas, and former *Saipan Tribune* sports reporter Shan Seman.

GARAPAN ROLLERS

Myth has it that the Garapan Rollers were named such because there were a lot of youth enamored with roller skates at the time the team was created. A story also goes that there used to be a skating rink in the village. G-Rollers coach and founder Joe Diaz said that nothing could be farther from the truth.

He said he adopted the name "Rollers" when he established the team in 1999 to describe the progression their players go through in the club. Currently, Diaz has six age groups in teams—U10, U12, U14, U16, U18, and U20.

Before Garapan Rollers, the village's team was called Garapanthers.

Among the cagers that did G-Rollers/Garapanthers proud include former national players Ed Diaz and Dennis Camacho, Rollers pioneers Connell Pierce and Kevin Cequena, do-it-all swingman Pete Iguel, and current CNMI men's team leading scorer and Adamson University Soaring Falcon-in-waiting Jericho Cruz.

NOTES

- The Los Angeles Lakers' original franchise was the Minneapolis Lakers from Minnesota, home of the Great Lakes.
- The Red Sox were named after the "hose" stitched on the jerseys of players of the original Boston teams.
- The Padres were actually named after the priests (fathers) at the old Spanish Missions in California. The first mission was in San Diego.

CHALAN KANOA SAINTS

Now this is a gimme.

Chalan Kanoa's present team is named the Saints because the village is where the Archdiocese of Chalan Kanoa is located. Outside of calling them the Crusaders or the Bishops, Saints seems the most appropriate.

Before being called the Saints, teams from Chalan Kanoa were also once called D-1ers. Former Verizon masters playmaker Frank Iglecias used to don the D-1ers jersey, while the most recent Saints players I remember include hulking center Mel Manibusan, whippet-quick guard Christian Villacrusis, and do-it-all swingman Ton Pangelinan.

SAN ANTONIO SIXERS

Basketball talent from San Antonio was overflowing so much earlier in the decade that two rival teams represented the village: the Sixers and 69ers.

When Sixers coach Ryan Nisperos went off-island, coach Ray Duenas dumped the 69ers name and adopted the legendary Sixers moniker.

Tony and George Benavente put the Sixers on the map back in '80s and the team would enjoy resurgence in the late '90s and at the start of the millennium with players like Luis Cepeda, Cedric Palacios, Dave Sablan, John Sablan, Henry Sablan, Nathan Sablan, and Eric Van Meter leading the way.

Like Hi-5 and D-1ers, the Sixers were named because the village has been designed district 6.

Continued on Page 15

For the love of the game

Able-bodied athletes and their glorious victories are a dime a dozen. And no, we don't knock them or belittle their skills; after all, they all make the pantheon of idols and heroes that the world looks up to. It is, however, when someone rises above debilitating conditions and challenges to reach for the stars that the imagination catches fire, putting a face to that most human of struggles to survive and conquer unimaginable odds. These triumphs—best celebrated when you least expect them—highlight life-affirming moments and feed the human spirit's indomitable will to reach its fullest potential. Here are stories of three inspiring people who've found ways to shine in sports despite their limitations.

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

One-armed bowler

Yes, you read that right.

Ben Aizon, who has been knocking down pins at the two bowling alleys on Saipan for 29 years now, uses only his left arm.

The 73-year-old Aizon lost his right arm in a freak accident in 1982 while working as a heavy equipment operator.

"I had not one but two near death experiences. First was after the accident when the payloader I was operating fell about 100 feet near the old airport and all I saw downhill was the wide blue sea. The second one was when my shredded right arm swelled. It had to be cut or I'd die," he said.

Aizon's left hand was also badly scoured that doctors had to graft skin taken from other parts of his body to fix the fingers. His index finger was almost cut into half.

Despite losing an arm, Aizon never thought about quitting bowling. Six years after that catastrophic accident, Aizon returned to the Saipan Bowling Center.

"I still have my other arm and it got even stronger," said the lefty.

When he still had two arms, Aizon's highest score was 278 and he ussually had a 0 to 3 handicap. He slowed down after the accident, but still gives regular bowlers a run for their money. He even placed second to perfect gamer Robert Talavera in one local tournament and finished in the Top 3 in a couple more competitions.

"If he has two arms, he may be one of the perfect gamers here. He could have won a lot of tournaments too," Talavera said.

In one tournament, Aizon gave a Guam bowler such a bad beating that the visitor couldn't believe that he lost to a one-armed bowler not just once but thrice.

Aizon became an instant celebrity when he joined a competition in Kyoto, Japan.

"A Japanese celebrity even hugged me tight because she could not believe I played good even with only one hand. For me, bowling is not only about being physically ready, but also mentally. If you tell yourself you can do it, you can. Just have faith," Aizon said.

'Coach Joe'

Rollers Basketball Club's Joe Diaz is finally revealing a secret that he has kept from his parents for years.

"I played baseball when I was 10 years old and my parents didn't know that. I had to sneak out of our home when I had games because I knew my parents would not allow me to play," Diaz recalls, smiling.

Yes, Diaz's parents, Vicente and Debra, were overprotective but who wouldn't be if your only child was born with spine problems and had been told by doctors not to do too much physical activities—like playing sports.

Diaz, known to his players as Coach Joe, suffers from scoliosis that he acquired after being born in 1977. At the age of 6, he had to undergo an operation to put a brace on his spine for support.

Despite his condition, Diaz went on to play baseball for more than a year and even tried riding ATV on the side. "I had an ATV and used it in our backyard. I even thought of competing. However, that would require getting parental consent and I knew my parents would say a big no," he said.

Diaz's focus shifted to basketball, starting out with the Garapan Mallards—this time with his parents' permission. He then joined a U14 team in the old inter-village league, playing point guard for the Paredos.

From a youth player, Coach Joe blossomed to become one of the most respected mentors in the sport. He started coaching in 1999 and now has a pool of about 100 players ranging from 8 to 20 years old. Among his proud products are Jericho Cruz, Pete Iguel, Jose Tumaquip, and Dan Barcinas, who all suited up for the CNMI Nationals.

When coaching, Diaz said he tries to balance things and adjust to each player's needs. "If I am with the younger players, I am very patient, but with the older ones I am strict. I tell the big guys, I am not here to babysit them, so they have to do what is expected of them," he said.

He is also unforgiving when it comes to academics: No good grades, no basketball.

"Our players and their parents

sign a contract with us before they could join the club. In the contract, the player has to maintain his GPA. If his grades go down, he has to undergo tutoring and improve or face suspension," Diaz said.

His more than 10 years of coaching earned him the prestigious "Honorary Rotarian of the Year" award from the Rotary Club of Saipan last year.

"Growing up, I never considered myself a person with disability. I am a regular guy who loves to learn and teach what I learned. I understand those moms and dads who don't want their kids to get hurt, but parents have to let their children go and spread their wings. Our parents will leave us one day and when that time comes, we should be capable of taking care of ourselves," Diaz said.

The Life Saver

Gary De Guzman, 55, has been saving lives for more than 20 years. But when he was just 8, he almost lost his.

"I had polio when I was in grade school. I had this very high fever that lasted for several days," de Guzman said. "At one point the doctor said if my condition will not improve within 24 hours, I might die."

He lived, but with a shriveled right leg that is now shorter than his left.

Which makes the fact that he earns a living as a lifeguard even more inspiring. De Guzman worked for about six years as lifeguard in a resort in the Philippines and 16 years for the Kan Pacific Swimming Pool. Now, he is one of the coaches of Saipan Swim Club and a perennial participant in local open water swims.

"I actually started as a maintenance staff in a resort. Then I swam with the lifeguards in our company and learned to swim and enjoy the water, which became my sanctuary. I had friendly races with my fellow lifeguards and beat them on many occasions," said De Guzman.

A friend and fellow lifeguard convinced him to work on Saipan in 1993. Here, De Guzman honed his swimming skills, both in the pool and open water. He trains while on a break from his lifeguarding duties, joins group swims, and watches what he eats. His favorite event is the butterfly. His best time in the 50m butterfly is 33 seconds; in the 100m freestyle, it's 1:13.00.

This father of two loves doing long races in open water. De Guzman once finished the 20K race from Mariana Resort to Pacific Islands Club and also swam from Managaha Island to Micro Beach several times.

The SSC coach, who handles the club's white team (6- to 8-year-old swimmers), said it is not hard for him to swim, as he uses his strong arms in the water. "I learned to accept that my right leg is different from the normal one, so I have to find a way to compensate for that and keep up with the rest of the swimmers," the San Roque resident said.

"Some people give me this surprised look every time I move out of the water. Before, I was conscious about it, but later on I just ignored them and let myself be me, as I know what I am capable of doing despite this condition," he said.

At first glance, De Guzman, Aizon, and Diaz may be different from your regular swimmer, bowler, and player/coach, but a closer look will show that they're really not that different, with the same passion for their sports, a similar drive to succeed, and the stubborn will to surmount the hurdles that life throws their way.

From Page 13

KAGMAN COUGARS

Once upon a time, players from Kagman were known as Cougars. But because the large feline now has a negative connotation mainly due to "*Desperate Housewives*," teams from the village have lately used names like Lions and Ayuyus to identify themselves.

Kagman Lions also seems like a perfect fit since a statue of a lion can be seen across the Mobil gas station on the highway leading toward the village.

Some of the best players to come out of the homestead include Gyles Ruluked and brothers Ed and Ad Arriola, and its teams were coached by founder Ray Lizama.

SAN VICENTE SUNRISERS

The sun rises from the east and that's why it's not hard to figure out that the team from San Vicente has always been known as the Sunrisers. Sometimes they shorten it and are know as just the Suns.

The Sunrisers I covered always preferred black-colored jerseys, making one wonder why they didn't just call themselves the San Vicente black holes.

Regardless of the length of the name or the hue of their uniforms, opposing teams in the past always had a handful against Sunrisers greats like Jawn Joyner, Charlie Peter, Jeremy Sablan, and Dave Palacios.

MATANSA SPARKS

While the origin of the name Sparks remains a mystery, Matansa actually stands not for one but three villages in northern Saipan—As Matuis, Tanapag, and San Roque.

A relatively new team formed by George Cruz in the last decade, known players to come out of the Matansa organization includes the likes of Ben Jones, Patrinos Mario, and Jojo Ulloa.

This compilation of team names in basketball—and their origins—is by no means a complete one. Future editions of *TAGA Sports* will discuss other team names not only in basketball but other sports as well.

LEINA KIM

Her father's daughter

MARK RABAGO
TAGA Sports Associate Editor

Height: 5'4"
Weight: 120 lbs
Born: May 21, 1992
Village: Susupe, Saipan
Favorite golfer: Rory McIlroy
Type of clubs used: Nike and Clevelands
Favorite golf outfit: I love Nike attire, but I also favor UnderArmor and Adidas.
High school: Marianas Baptist Academy
Other sports: I also enjoy volleyball and sometimes basketball and bowling.

Leina Kim tees off for TAGA *Sports* at the Coral Ocean Point Golf Resort. | JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

From the very first time she held a golf club until her improbable victory in the 2011 Philippine Independence Day Tournament, there's always been one constant in Leina Kim's life—the presence of her father, Kwang Young Kim.

It was therefore an unfamiliar sight to see the 19-year-old incoming sophomore at Colorado State University-Pueblo hoist the ladies flight championship in the 2011 Tournament of Champions without her doting father by her side.

Kwang Young, who settled on Saipan in 1972 and owns Sun Palace Hotel, fell ill shortly after her daughter's breakthrough victory in the Fil-Taga tournament in June.

Leina left for college a few days after her fourth TOC women's division win last August. However, before hopping on a plane for the U.S. mainland, she promised to dedicate all tournaments she will take part in to her beloved father.

"My entire golf game is dedicated to my dad. He was there from the beginning, through thick and thin. I just want him to know that I love him and that without him golf wouldn't be a part of my life today. I also want to tell him that I will dominate every tournament I am in while I am in Colorado," she said.

Leina began playing golf under the close watch of her dad when she was just 10. She was not alone, though, in learning the gentleman's sport since her brother, former CNMI youth champion Michael Kim, was also there tutoring her.

"I started because I was inspired by my brother and to prepare myself to help get me a golf scholarship. My dad taught me everything I needed to know and my brother was there to guide me as well."

It wasn't really an auspicious start; Leina sheepishly volunteered that her first practice round at Marianas Country Club was a dud.

"I remember on my first hole, I couldn't get my ball out of the sand trap and I felt like giving up. But eventually, after four hits, I managed to get it out," she said.

Eventually, with the help of Kwang Young and Michael, the Marianas Baptist Academy graduate would become proficient enough to join her very first golf tournament.

Being half-Filipina—her mother, Shirley Dela Rosa, hails from Las Pinas, Philippines—she chose the 105th Philippine Independence Day tournament on June 14, 2003, to make her debut.

And Leina didn't disappoint, placing third and making her dad proud—not bad for an 11-year-old with only roughly a year and half experience in playing the game.

Since then, Leina has won 21 tournaments, not including local fundraisers, readily admitting that she has lost count and only keeps track of the competitions she won based on the number of championship trophies she has in her cabinet.

Among her most memorable golf conquests was the 2011 Philippine Independence Day Golf Tournament held on June 11 at the Coral Ocean Point Golf Resort.

"I was just so nervous and anxious about who the winner would be. No one told me and apparently, my parents received a call saying I won but didn't tell me. Everyone kept it a secret, but that made it more exciting because after they said my name, I let out a big sigh of relief," she happily relates. »

JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

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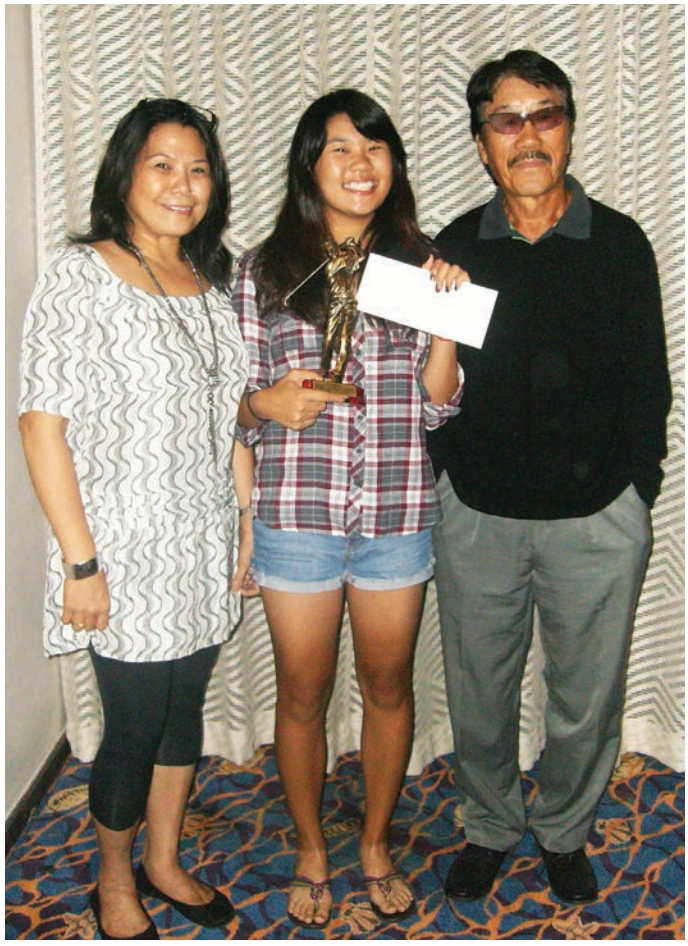

MARK RABAGO

Leina Kim, center, with parents Shirley Dela Rosa Kim, left, and Kwang Young Kim during the awards ceremony of the 2011 Philippine Independence Day Tournament at Aqua Resort Club.

Leina, whose best score in a tournament is a 70 or 71, said that one of her immediate goals is to play more consistently.

"I'm working extra hard this summer so I could play under during college. I'm not perfect so there are a lot of things I need to improve on. Lately my short games have been on a rocky path, but I can make it," she said.

She also hopes to find her niche as part of the Colorado State University-Pueblo golf varsity.

"I hope to share what I learned from my father and help everyone play well so that we can put CSU-P's name out there as a strong competitive school in golf and academics. I am more than excited to play golf in college. My coach, Greg Dillon, in fact made me feel like I'm already part of the team. I hope to play really well and to top each tournament out there."

One of her dreams is to qualify for an LPGA tournament sometime in the future as well as play golf in other countries, including the Philippines and her father's birthplace, Korea.

Leina has this advice to aspiring youth golfers in the Commonwealth: Treat the sport seriously.

"Golf is not an easy sport. It requires a lot of your time, so much time that school is going to get tough for you. Golf is not something you pick as a hobby to do one day and think it's going to be easy. It has never been easy to begin with. Golf can be fun but you always have to keep your head in the game," she said.

Through all her successes and even while she shapes her future, Leina remains Kwang Young's devoted daughter.

"My dad is my inspiration. He is 75 years old and, before he became ill, he was still playing golf. You don't see a lot of super seniors out there hitting mid to high 80s and maybe 90s. But my dad has always been there for me. Even though he is really tough, he always finds a way to lower my scores."

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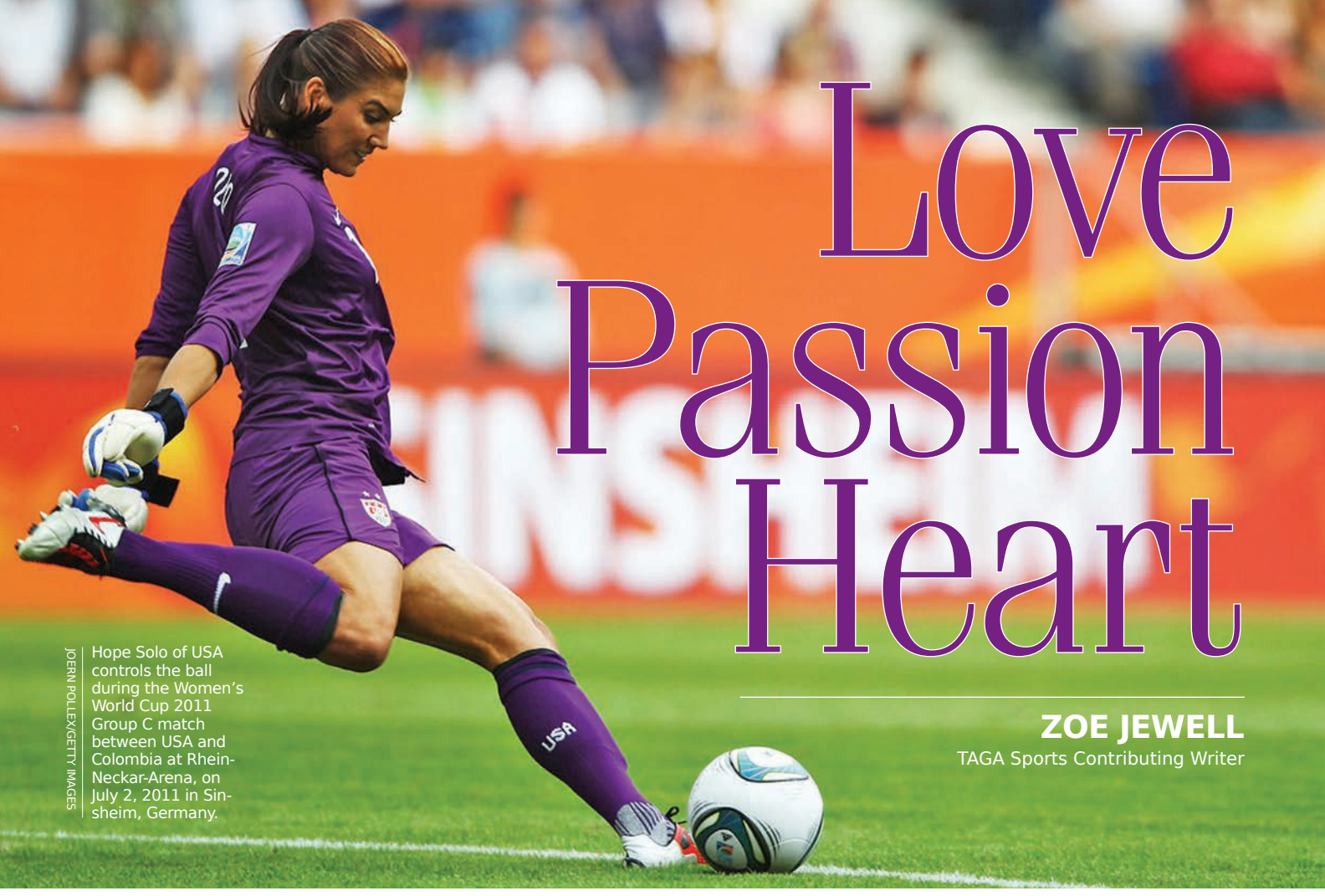
Love Passion Heart



JOERN POLLEX/GETTY IMAGES

Hope Solo of USA controls the ball during the Women's World Cup 2011 Group C match between USA and Colombia at Rhein-Neckar-Arena, on July 2, 2011 in Sinsheim, Germany.

ZOE JEWELL
TAGA Sports Contributing Writer

The Women's World Cup this summer captivated the world. Thousands of tickets were sold, stadiums were packed to the brim, ESPN ratings were off the charts, and even the final match between the USA and Japan broke the Twitter record for most tweets per second, beating out the Royal Wedding and Osama bin Laden's death. Luckily, I had the amazing opportunity to go to Germany and follow the USA team in their quest to win the championship. Unfortunately they weren't able to get the gold, but the experience was something I will never forget, as will anyone else who followed the show-stopping tournament.

I believe the United States fell in love with this USA team not only because of their skill and the technical ability but also because of the heart and passion that they exuded throughout the entire tournament. They never gave up, pushing and believing that anything was possible until that last whistle blew. And that exact sort of mentality and never-say-die attitude really reminded me of the CNMI Women's National Team and our attitude that having faith and belief in one another really can take you anywhere.

MARTIN ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

The U.S. women's national soccer team.

I love soccer, and that is pretty evident to anyone who knows me well. As a player for the CNMI team for six years, I have been through some ups and some downs, and though I can't exactly compare my experience to that of a USA player, I still know what it feels like to be a part of something so inspiring and groundbreaking. When Abby Wambach scored her goal in the 122nd minute, the latest goal in World Cup history, to lead her team to the semifinals, it made me think of when we, the CNMI women's team, scored our first goal against Guam in the 2009 EAFF tournament. It was a free kick, just outside the 18 yard box, and I remember lining up right with the Guam back line, waiting for the kick to be taken. I then saw Carrie Schuler, my teammate, strike the ball with her left foot, and I watched as it sailed past the keeper and into the net. That, to me, was my Abby Wambach moment, and though the circumstances don't exactly compare, I will never forget it. Even though I didn't score or contribute to the goal, I played in that game, I trained with those women for months leading up,

The CNMI Women's National Team celebrates after scoring its first ever goal in an international tournament, held in Tainan City, Taiwan, in 2009 in a game against Guam.

EAFF.COM

The CNMI Women's National Team.

and I believed in my teammates, just as I'm sure Abby Wambach believed Megan Rapinoe would get that cross to her head. Even though we didn't win the game against Guam, and even if it was just one goal, I still feel like it has been my greatest athletic achievement so far.

So, when the USA scored against Brazil in that magnificent game, for a moment, I felt like I could relate to those women. Though, of course, the games were quite different and the stakes were a lot higher for the USA, I knew exactly how they felt when that miracle goal was scored. That moment after the ball hits the back of the net, where all you can hear is silence. The few seconds when you are running to your team and your body feels like it's floating. That instant when you embrace your teammates and feel like you couldn't squeeze them any tighter, couldn't love them anymore. The image of the ball going into the goal, replaying in your mind over and over. I know how it feels to be a part of a goal that will forever be monumental. The odds were against Carrie, and the odds were sure against Abby Wambach. Nobody expected us to score a free kick outside of the 18-yard box in our first real competitive tournament, and nobody expected the U.S. to score a goal in the last minute of overtime.

Love. Passion. Heart. Both teams play with a passion that you cannot coach. Having played with the CNMI team, I know that we never give up until the whistle blows. We fight, and we push, and we leave every ounce of our being out on the field. Even when we played South Korea, and the score was in double digits, we didn't stop playing. We recognize and understand that what we are doing is only the beginning, that in 10, or even five years, young girls will get the opportunity to play in tournaments and against great competition because of what we did, because of the sacrifices we've made and the struggles we've gone through. The USA women display the exact same passion. They fight for one another, they push one another, and they bring out the best in one another. It's not about egos, or money, or fame. It's about the love of the game and the passion to play it. The Women's World Cup displayed skill and a level of play that many women and teams will never match, but they also proved that some parts of sports are truly universal.

CATHERINE ROSARIO PERRY
TAGA Sports Contributing Writer

Good Darts

It's 6:30 on a Thursday evening as I pull up to one of my favorite bar and grill hangouts in search of a story on darts. Well aware of how crowded the darts corner gets on league night, I've arrived early in hopes of squeezing in a few interviews before the crowd arrives and things get heated.

I'm not disappointed. A few players have also arrived early to start their warm-up. Warm up? My idea of a warm-up involves an increased heart rate and a light sweat. In this case, it involves tossing a projectile weighing a few grams a few feet away and then downing a cold one. Lucky for me, the players also warm up quickly to the idea of being interviewed.

Dressed in a black Fotten Gaga' shirt and black jeans, Russ "Dangeruss" Simon is playing with team One Shot tonight, and he's generous with his answers to my eager inquiries. Double score, triple score, 301, 501, single cricket, doubling-in, doubling-out—I quickly realize there's much more to this game than meets the eye, or rather, hitting the bull's-eye. I'm just getting started, and I'm already getting the feeling I might be in over my head.

There's a reason Russ is here so early, and that reason is his teammate Benji Rayphand. It's Benji's first night playing for the team and his opportunity to earn a nickname with his first win. He's calmly realistic about his chances here in the B league.

"Probably going to bomb, but it's all good, because it's just to get together and get to know other players," he says. "Win or lose, it's all good."

Fortunately, he's got a sizable amount of backup on his team, including teammate Scott "Big Scott" Leon Guerrero. When "Big Scott" stands up to throw, someone quips about how the sun is blocked out. It's his second season, and he shares the best advice he's ever received.

"Just shut up and play," he offers. "The captain of my former team was really technical. 'You got to throw at a certain angle,' he would say. It was stressing me out, but the co-captain said, 'Just shut up and play.'"

So, what attracted him to darts in the first place?

"It's the only sport I can find where the folks won't yell at me for drinking during the game," he admits.

As the evening progresses I'm finding it ironic that I—the virtual teetotaler—lobbied my editor to cover this fringe sport that I now discover seems to often revolve around imbibing. On top of that, the Saipan Electronic Darts Association, or SEDA, now in its 38th season, boasts 64 teams and 370 players. Over 2,500 players have participated in SEDA leagues since 1993. Not as obscure a sport as I had thought…

Tables soon fill with fans and teams—Sekid, Oh Yeah, and Why Not join the mix. As the conversation around me meanders from the Guam dart league, to the weekend barbecue, to the guy who was just busted for pretending he was playing in a league so he could hang out once a week with his friends, I realize the story unfolding isn't just about hitting the numbers, but it's about the bonds of friendship and family, like those of One Shot.

Oscar "Mexican" Porras was recruited into the game by his cousin, Gus "Nightmare" Ybanez. Now playing his fourth season, Porras is also captain of One Shot, and Ybanez is playing catch-up with his cousin.

IN THE CASE

Your dart tips, shafts, and flight can all be customized to your personal taste. Here's a look at the choices of One Shot.

RUSS: Carries a dart case with a reggae-colored KKMP radio station sticker slapped on the front and broken dart holders inside. He's packing 18g darts with long tips and standard flights. "I like the weight. Different people like different weights. If I lose a flight, I just grab [any other] one."

BENJI: Is borrowing darts here on his first night, until Oscar shows up and hands him an expensive set. "I won those today. Those are for you; you keep them."

SCOTT: Sports an $80 black diamond plated case that he picked up for $10. Inside are G-shock, 16g, medium-tipped Bumblebees in his favorite color of green. "I'm the biggest guy with the smallest darts. They probably cost about $100, but I got it free because I got MVP." He's also packing extra flights, extra tips, and a watch he's trying to sell. "I used to have candy in there, but somebody took it."

OSCAR: Doesn't have a case. "I just carry my darts in my bag. Nothing fancy." He prefers Bobcat shafts with long tips. "The short tips break a lot."

GUS: A Parana case with—what else—19-gram Nightmare brand darts. "I usually throw with 18 grams. I waited until I won one game with these, and then I kept playing with them." Medium shaft, Sinister brand flights (narrow and made for speed and accuracy), and fluorescent long tips. Has enough space for more flights and an extra pair of darts.

DEXTER: "Some people go for the expensive one. I just go for whatever is comfortable with me." Used a $20 dart and changed the accessories; 19 grams, aluminum shaft, plastic flights, long tips. "When I shoot it's more to the point, I don't arch. Pretty much everything has to be heavy, because I shoot hard."

CJ: Leaves his case at home. "I always carry [my darts] when I go." His darts are 18 grams, with aluminum shafts, spinner flights, and long tips. "When I first started throwing it was more stable, and I got used to it."

"I bring my cousin in; he's got three or four trophies, and I ain't got any, yet," says Ybanez. "My story is trying to get a trophy. I want something that has my name on it, because I've been playing a lot longer than these guys."

Meanwhile, Porras has a game plan to help achieve that.

"Start your best players first, and keep them running. We want to start off winning the game," he says.

In spite of his confidence, he is also cautious.

"Never underestimate your opponent even though you're ahead, 'cause you could lose it just like that," he says. "Everyone's a good player. One night you can be on fire, the next…"

He doesn't have to wait until the next night to find out. A short while later the room erupts with a roar when Carmen Sablan of Why Not beats Porras on the final dart of their game.

"The strength of a woman!"

"That's why the Titanic sank!"

"Follow her example, boys!"

"What'd I tell you?" Porras says.

Porras, too, is sporting a Fotten Gaga' shirt. The team trend becomes clear when I meet the sixth member of the team, Dexter Mendiola, the owner and designer of the popular brand. As TAGA *Sports* is a PG rated magazine, his nickname remains unmentioned. However, his talent speaks for itself. He's been playing for three years and designs the One Shot team shirt.

"It's addicting. Once you start you always want to try hit the numbers that you want," Mendiola says.

CJ "Sniper" Castro plays as often as he can, including practicing on the machines between classes at Northern Marianas College. He finished his first season ranked in the Top 10, so he graduated to the B division.

"I like going up there without knowing who (sic) you're challenging," he says.

As the evening draws to a close, "not knowing" delivers a big surprise to One Shot's Rayphand, who unexpectedly wins his first game in the league, earning the right to a team nickname and T-shirt. A round of fist bumps follow.

"Good dart!"

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A lightning rod...on KELVIN 'THE BIG HIT' FITIAL

WALTER CEPEDA-SUTHERLAND
TAFA Sports Staff Writer

Marianas Elite's Kelvin "The Big Hit" Fitial shows his heavyweight title belt after scoring a TKO win over Guam's Roque Martinez in the fourth round of their bout in the Pacific Xtreme Combat 24 last June 11, 2011, at the Resorts World Manila's Newport Performing Arts Theater in the Philippines. KC CRUZ

The current Pacific Xtreme Combat heavyweight champion, Kelvin "The Big Hit" Fitial, is one of the most admired athletes among CNMI youths. They relate to him because he went through an underprivileged upbringing just like many of them.

Paradoxically, he is also a polarizing figure, a product of his past entanglements with the law that he candidly blames on a combination of the stupidity of youth and the bad choices he made.

Just this past August, Fitial finished serving a seven-day prison term for an assault conviction back in February 2010, when he beat up a businessman in Garapan. Fitial also has an outstanding warrant in Butte County, California for burglary from way back in 2003; he was sentenced to five years, of which he served nearly one, before receiving permission from a judge to return to Saipan.

"I was young and it was my first time in the States when I ran into trouble there," he admits.

Still under probation when he moved back, the Butte County police department later informed Fitial that, according to them, he had violated his probation. A report, however, on ChicoER.com on Sept. 8 quotes Butte police as saying that they have no plans to bring Fitial back to face charges.

"I am not proud of the mistakes I made in the past. When I came home I started getting into MMA because it was a good place for me to channel my aggression in a suitable environment. After I stumbled and made some poor decisions in the 2010 incident, I started telling myself that I can't keep doing stupid things like that," said Fitial in a late August interview.

Naturally, Fitial has aspirations to return to the U.S. mainland for an opportunity to further his mixed martial arts career, but is still ironing out such legal issues. Notably, although California currently considers him a fugitive, Fitial has traveled to Guam on several occasions without conflict.

It is not just about Fitial, though, as other MMA fighters have also figured in various run-ins with the law. MMA is the fastest growing sport in the world and incidents such as these are common in every city around the globe. In the last six months alone, three other MMA fighters in the Commonwealth were arrested for separate incidents, mostly involving assault and theft (or both), prompting local MMA promoter Trench Tech Purebred to

and off the octagon

KC CRUZ

Marianas Elite's Kelvin "The Big Hit" Fitial unleashes solid strikes on Guam's Roque Martinez during their rematch in the Pacific Xtreme Combat 24 last June 11, 2011, at the Resorts World Manila's Newport Performing Arts Theater in the Philippines. Fitial won via TKO in the fourth round

come up with a code of conduct for its fighters and any other fighters who want to compete in its events.

Fitial wants people, however, to believe him when he says he has changed. Since his last brush with the law, "I have surrounded myself with positive influences and focused even harder on my MMA career. I also realized that kids do look up to me and it is important for me not to let them and my family down," he said.

Fitial graduated from Marianas High School in 2001, then left the CNMI for California. When he returned to the CNMI, he proceeded to attend Northern Marianas College. His mother fell ill during his freshman year, causing him to put his higher education on hold in order to help take care of her and his four siblings.

By that time, Fitial had already built a reputation as a raw street fighter on Saipan, which led to him ultimately entering his first MMA event as an amateur in 2005. Fitial underwent his first training lessons at Trench Tech Purebred under Cuki Alvarez before making his occupation official in late November of that year.

Currently on a slate of 12 wins, six-losses, two draws, and one no-contest, Fitial's six-year career actually started out a bit rocky. He lost his first two matches before righting the ship to a respectable but non-dominating six wins and four losses with a draw in his first two years.

Fitial danced with roughly an even card out of the gate, but stepped up his game in 2007, taking on seven different opponents. He notched four wins, two losses, and the draw during that span.

Then the law of averages humbled him from 2008 through mid-2009 as he dropped two fights, a questionable no-contest, and only one win.

Fitial stepped up his game from July 2009 up to the present, catching a wave of five wins with the disputed draw decision against Guam's Roque Martinez in Part 1 of the PXC title saga in January. After the draw, Trench Tech's Alvarez, who was ringside at the fight, presented Fitial with the People's Champion commemorative belt upon his return to Saipan.

Fitial silenced any doubts about the title match draw about four months later in front of a stadium crowd in Manila, Philippines. Fitial won the match in the fourth round via TKO, due to ground-and-pound strikes to the head.

Fitial is also the current Legend Fighting Championship Heavyweight champion in Hong Kong, China and has recently spoken with various promoters in Korea, Japan, and Australia for some potential future endeavors. Fitial also shared thoughts of one day continuing his career in the United States, where he was recently invited to train with Ultimate Fighting Championship Hall of Famer Dan Severn at his Michigan Sports Camps facility in Coldwater, Michigan.

Fitial will have the biggest fight of his mixed martial arts career approaching this December in Manila, the Philippines. He is the headliner main event for PXC 27 where he will defend his title against the winner of a four-man challenger tournament.

Right now Fitial plans on clearing up technical issues regarding his passport so he can travel to Thailand for a one-month training tour. He plans to visit a handful of Muay Thai kickboxing gyms to add yet another weapon to his skill set. Fitial is also open to perhaps a fight in Korea after his Thailand trip in preparation for his December title defense.

"We are still waiting to hear from the promoters. Who knows, if both the offer and timing is right, I'm down to take a fight before my PXC bout," he said.

Ultimately, it will be up to Fitial himself if he wants to live up or live down his reputation for trouble. He is without a doubt a skilled fighter in the prime of his youth and he will indisputably win more accolades in the years to come but, at the end of the day, it will be his conduct both inside and outside the octagon that will be judged when the history of CNMI sports and mixed martial arts is finally written.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The Competitive Cecilia

Despite a bad back and knee, when Cecilia Lisua held the bat and prepared to swing for this TAGA *Sports* photo shoot, the shadow of one of the most dominant fast pitch softball players in CNMI in the 1960s to '70s was still there.

With knuckles lined up on the bat handle, she stood outside the batter's box and jumped in, landing with her knees slightly flexed, weight on the balls of her feet, and toes pointed to the other batter's box. In between these movements, she shared tips on how to swing and hit the ball, depending on where you want it to land.

With effective form and a trove of technical know-how, no wonder Lisua racked up the most number of individual awards—from MVP to home run queen—in the then crowd-drawing women's fast-pitch league on Saipan for more than a decade.

Lisua was so competitive that she cried when she lost a game for the first time. She was not able to eat and sleep well, making her grandmother fret. The member of the 2005 Class of the CNMI Sports Hall of Fame is now a grandmother herself and, though retired from softball for more than three decades, her love for sports has never ceased.

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer
Photography by Jessie Pagsinohin

"I watch sports programs on TV and every time I see various games and the players, I remember the good old days at the field where the Joeten Kiyu Library is now located. I knew I once made some of those good plays," the 59-year-old Gualo Rai resident said.

Lean and slide

One of the most memorable games Lisua played in the fast-pitch league was against District 4 (Garapan) in 1966.

Lisua and her District 7/11 challenged District 4 for the pennant. In the early round, District 4 stunned the favored District 7/11 for the latter's first and lone loss of the season.

"I cried at home after the loss. My grandmother asked why I am so sad and I didn't have an appetite for several days. I told her about the loss. After that, I could not stop thinking about getting back to the field and playing against them again," Lisua said.

The much-awaited rematch came and it was up to Lisua to exact sweet revenge as the game was tied at the bottom of the sixth with two outs. She went to bat and singled. Next up to bat was Maggie Sablan, but before she stepped up to the plate, Lisua talked to her.

"I told her to do me a favor. I asked her not to swing and just watch the ball," Lisua said.

While Sablan watched the balls coming from pitcher Frances Taro, Lisua was busy stealing bases. The District 7/11 first baseman was one base away from scoring the winning-run and she did it—in style.

Lisua ran and later saw the ball reaching catcher Carmen Rabauliman. She continued running then leaned forward a few steps closer to Rabauliman who was getting ready for a tag out. When Rabauliman reached in, Lisua leaned back and slid home.

"Safe." Lisua heard chief umpire Ignacio Santos shout.

Lisua's team went on to win the match, one of the many games District 7/11 took from 1966 to 1976 with its power hitter on its roster. On her 10-year stint with District 7/11, Lisua claimed a handful of MVP trophies and other individual awards. Her outstanding performance on the field convinced her then volleyball and athletics coach, Kurt Barnes, to look for a collegiate team in the mainland for the District 7/11 slugger.

"I had a chance to try out for a collegiate team in San Jose, California, but I didn't go as I didn't want to leave my grandmother behind," Lisua said.

For Barnes, Lisua's bright star remains undimmed, even up to this time.

"She is probably the greatest female athlete in the history of Micronesia. She was that good. Too bad she never had a chance to play in the U.S. Her stats for one of the leagues she played in [10 games] was .600 batting average, 46 RBIs, on base percentage of 800, and a slugging percentage of 2.000 or two bases every time she batted. Even Barry Bonds and Babe Ruth never achieved those statistics," Barnes said.

The mother of three played in the fast-pitch league for 11 seasons, starting at a young age of 14. She was one of the few married women who lasted long in the league, quitting in 1978, one year after she transferred to another team.

"I played with a squad composed of young players, as I wanted new challenges. I wanted to inspire and lead them," Lisua said.

She left fast-pitch due to back problems a year later and went on to work for the Finance Department of the then Trust Territory Government, the Public School System, and in a private construction company.

Volleyball, basketball, athletics

While playing fast-pitch softball at night, Lisua was also into volleyball, basketball, and athletics in other times of the day.

She was part of the Marianas Team that competed in the 1969 Micronesian Olympics and played volleyball, helping her team win the gold medal against Palau. Lisua also played in local volleyball leagues and joined forces with softball teammate Maria Pua. Pua was the setter and Lisua was the clever spiker, who tapped the ball sideways away from much taller blockers.

With her good ceiling, Lisua played forward and center spots in basketball and coached her own team too.

In athletics, she suited up for the CNMI in the 1975 South Pacific Games in Guam.

"She competed against athletes from Fiji, Tahiti, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, the two Samoas, and New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), which were all powerhouses in sports back in the '70s. She ended up fourth by one centimeter. Weather was so terrible and I don't know how they could get an accurate measurement. She lost third place in the last throw," Barnes said.

With nagging back and knee pains sidelining her from softball, basketball, and volleyball in the late '80s, Lisua stopped playing but did regular walks and runs on the track to stay in shape.

Tough as a man

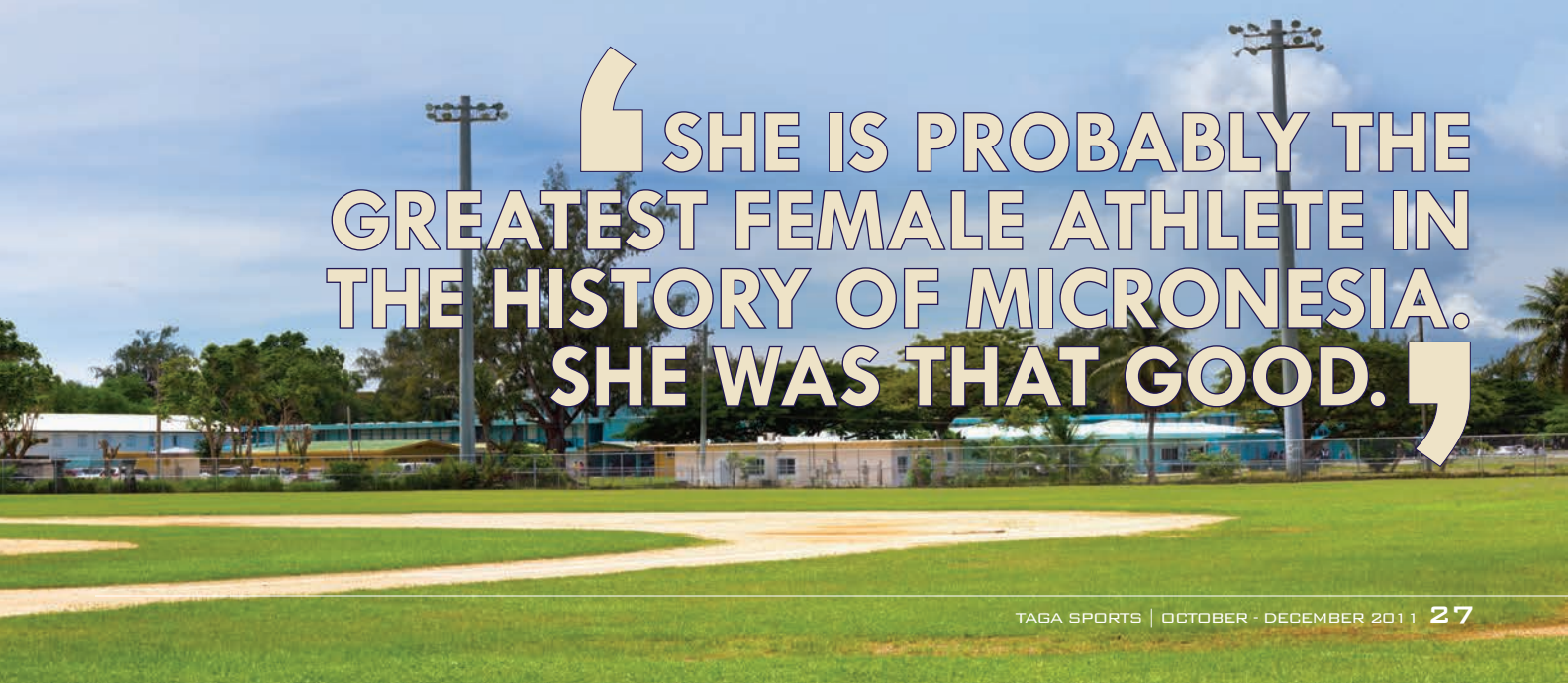
When the fast-pitch league folded up, women's slow-pitch games came in the late '80s, but these failed to lure Lisua back to the field, even though she knew she still has what it takes to play.

"No offense meant but I felt slow-pitch is not your competitive-type of game. Fast-pitch is. In fast-pitch, we played like boys. We were trained like boys," said Lisua, who trained under Felix Iginoef.

"We practiced after school at the field with crops potholes. Our coach hit the ball so hard that we sometimes lost our balance while trying to stop or catch it. When it was our turn at bat, we had to look and play tough and not act like we're afraid of getting hit by the ball."

Lisua thanks fast-pitch league founder Felix Rabauliman, Iginoef, and Barnes for helping her become a very competitive athlete.

"Without them, you wouldn't hear tales about those legendary games and how I and my other teammates did it. These coaches and officials helped me make a name in the sports community and whatever recognition I earned, they were also part of them." TS



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